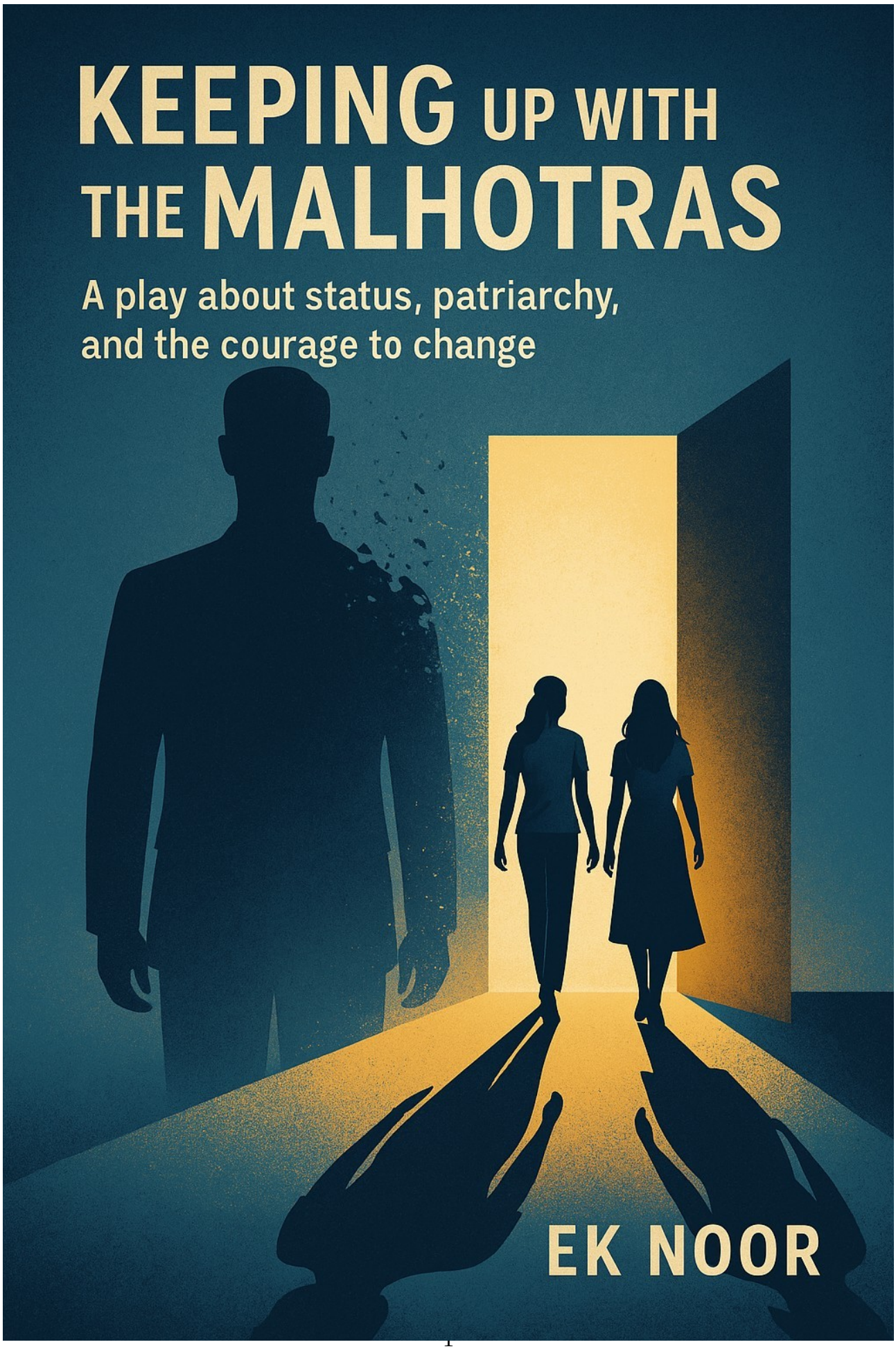
KEEPING UP WITH THE MALHOTRAS
A play about status, patriarchy, and the courage to change
EK NOOR

Keeping up with the Malhotras

By Ek Noor

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Disclaimer: All characters are fictitious and represents no community.

Characters

RAJ MALHOTRA (Father)**:** A businessman consumed by status, forever chasing validation. His business is struggling.

SIMRAN MALHOTRA (Mother**)**: The queen of humble-bragging and a master of social one-upmanship.

TISHYA MALHOTRA (Daughter): A young woman crushed by the weight of expectations but seeking her own path.

TARA MALHOTRA (Daughter): A social media influencer struggling with the contrast between real life and her online persona.

MEENA SETHI (Aunty): The ever-watchful gossip queen, fueling the fire of societal pressure.

VIKRAM MEHTA (Uncle): The insufferable show-off uncle, flaunting inherited wealth to make others feel small.

DR ANDREW CLARKE (English Doctor)**:** The pragmatic voice of reason, untainted by cultural madness.

BANK MANAGER: A reluctant messenger of financial doom.

ENGLISH GROOM: A non speaking role, a silent yet symbolic contrast to Desi extravagance.

ACT 1
MEET THE FAMILY

SCENE 1: THE PERFECT FACADE

The MALHOTRA family's semi-detached house lounge, in London. The decor is expensive and in rich colours. Gold trimmed furniture, chandeliers and a massive "Live, Laugh, Love" sign.

(SIMRAN MALHOTRA paces, phone in hand, performing for an audience she cannot see.)

SIMRAN:

(on the phone, exclaiming theatrically)

"No, no, we live a very simple life, MEENA Aunty ji. Just a modest five-bedroom house, nothing extravagant!"

RAJ:

(reading The Financial Times, grumbling)
"Humble? You just spent £300 on a candle named 'Sicilian Sunset.' What does Sicily even smell like?"

SIMRAN:

(hissing)
"Shhh! MEENA Aunty is on the phone! She'll think we're struggling!"

(back to the phone, laughing)
"Haan ji, MEENA Aunty ji, we don't believe in showing off… By the way, have you seen our new Audi? No, no, not the big one, just the small Q7."

SIMRAN:

"Acha! Okay, see you soon!."

(Meanwhile, TISHYA sits on the sofa, looking exhausted. TARA is taking Instagram selfies nearby.)

TARA:

(posing with a cup of tea, phone camera on herself)
"Good morning, my loves! Remember, true happiness is internal!" (*takes a sip, then gags)*

"Mum! Where is my Earl Grey?! How can I inspire people with… PG tips?!"

TISHYA:

(groans, rubbing her forehead)
"TARA, your happiness is so internal it's basically invisible."

(MEENA Aunty sweeps in, exuding self-importance, clutching a Tesco bag like it's from Harrods.)

MEENA Aunty:

(gasps theatrically)
"Oh ho! My dear MALHOTRAs! Always looking so… content! Not like the Vermas… Did you hear? Their daughter is still unmarried at thirty! Imagine the disgrace!"

SIMRAN:

(horrified and gasps, clutching her pearls)
"Thirty?! And still single? How do they show their faces in the community?!"

MEENA Aunty:

(lowering her voice, fake concern)
"And I heard… they didn't even do a destination wedding for the other daughter. Just some basic hall in Southall!"

RAJ:

(disgusted)
"A community hall? Might as well serve Tesco meal deals while they're at it!"

TISHYA:

(frustrated, stands up)
"Are you guys... even listening to yourselves? This is insanity!**”**

RAJ:

(scoffs)
"Beti, this is just how society works. If we don’t show our success, people will assume we’ve failed."

TISHYA:

(sarcastic)
“Oh no! Not that! We can’t let MEENA Aunty think we’re middle class!"

(The laughter masks an uncomfortable truth.)

SCENE 2: THE WEDDING MADNESS

The MALHOTRAs lounge, now a full-blown wedding planning headquarters. Expensive bridal magazines, wedding brochures, and a laptop open, are scattered everywhere.

(SIMRAN scrolling through a wedding venue’s website on her phone while RAJ looks through budget spreadsheets on the laptop, looking increasingly stressed.)

SIMRAN:

(excitedly)

“"RAJ! I found the perfect wedding venue...it’s a small castle in the countryside. So simple, so elegant!"

RAJ:

(looks at the price on SIMRAN’s phone, chokes on his tea.)
"Simple?! £50,000! Are we buying the castle?!"

SIMRAN:

(waving him off)
"RAJ, it’s our daughter’s wedding! If we don’t do this, what will people say?"

RAJ:

(muttering to himself)
"What will Barclays Bank say... when they see my account after this?"

(TARA is filming an Instagram story while holding a designer wedding invitation sample.)

TARA:

(to her phone, in influencer mode)
"Hey guys! Planning a minimalist wedding for my sis, because true luxury is all about simplicity. Hashtag grateful!"

(turns to family, immediately changes tone)
"Mum, these invites must have gold! If they don’t, how will people know they are posh?"

TISHYA:

(groans, rubbing temples)
"Oh… hear me out… we could just have a normal wedding with normal invites and not spend money like we’re the Royal Family."

MEENA Aunty:

(gasps dramatically, enters the room)
"Beti, normal weddings are for normal families! We are not normal! Just last week, the Singhs booked a heli for the groom’s entrance and then it took the couple to the reception venue!"

RAJ:

(horrified)
"A helicopter?! Where are we getting married, Heathrow Airport?!"

VIKRAM Uncle:

(casually sipping tea)
"Oh yes, a chopper entrance is very classy. We did one for my nephew's wedding last year… but we kept it simple." *(smirks smugly)*

RAJ:
(clutching his chest slightly, mutters)
"It's always VIKRAM uncle… bloody VIKRAM."

TISHYA:

(exasperated, stands up)
"You're all mad! This isn't about my wedding is it? It's a competition! Dad, you're... literally stressed out of your mind..., but you're still doing this?! It's just like, I wanted to be a teacher but...no!...no!...you made me work long hours in the city… so you can impress people!"

RAJ:

(defensive, frustrated)
"I'm fine! It's just… mild chest tightness! Nothing serious!"

TISHYA:

(sarcastic)
"Oh yeah, mild chest tightness… totally normal when you're planning a wedding like it's the Oscars."

SIMRAN:

(dismissive)
"Beti, stress is normal for fathers. Your dad's heart is strong...like our family name!"

TISHYA:

(mocking)
"Yeah, and if he drops dead, at least he'll have a good family name."

(Awkward silence. RAJ forces a laugh but looks genuinely unwell.)

SCENE 3: THE WEDDING COLLAPSE

A grand wedding reception hall in London, decorated like a Bollywood film set. Chandeliers, golden arches, massive floral displays, too much of everything. The guests are multicultural.

(The scene opens in full chaos. Multicultural guests are arriving in flashy outfits. TARA is running around, filming everything for Instagram, while SIMRAN barks orders at wedding staff. RAJ, in a heavy embroidered sherwani, looks exhausted.)

SIMRAN:

(yelling at the waiters)
"Make sure the starters come out on gold plates! And don't let the guests touch the food before the photos!"

(TISHYA and ENGLISH GROOM enter holding hands and walk to the high table.)

TARA:

(holding her phone up, directing the videographer)
"Get my sister's first step on the carpet! No, no, the left foot first...it's more aesthetic!"

TISHYA:

(to herself, sighing)
"Lord, get me out...let me elope…"

VIKRAM Uncle:

(smug, patting RAJ on the back)
"Lovely wedding, RAJ! Of course, when we did my nieces's, we had a bigger hall, but this is… quaint."

RAJ:

(gritting his teeth, breathing heavily and mumbles)
"Yes, yes… quaint." *(clutches his chest slightly but shakes it off.)*

(RAJ is sweating, looking pale, but he keeps forcing a smile. MEENA Aunty, as usual, is adding fuel to the fire.)

MEENA Aunty:

(whispering loudly to SIMRAN)
"I heard the Vermas served tap water at their daughter's wedding. No imported Fiji water! Can you imagine?"

SIMRAN:

(horrified)
"Arre baba, we are not cheap! TARA, make sure you film the imported water bottles! Of course all the regular drinks are available too!"

(Meanwhile, RAJ's vision starts blurring. He grips the chair, struggling to breathe, but no one notices.)

(TISHYA and her ENGLISH GROOM sit at the high table, all eyes are on them, except for RAJ, who suddenly staggers.)

RAJ:
"SIMRAN… I… something's… wrong…"

(He clutches his chest, gasping.)

(Nobody reacts immediately.)

TARA: *(still recording, excited)*
"Oh my god! Dad's getting emotional! Iconic!"

TISHYA:

(noticing her father wobbling, alarmed, stands up and shouts)
"Dad? Dad!"

(RAJ collapses in the middle of the hall. Gasps. Screams. Absolute chaos.)

TISHYA: “Call the ambulance, for heaven’s sake, call the ambulance!”

SCENE 4: THE REALITY CHECK

In Hospital. The grand wedding is forgotten. SIMRAN, TISHYA, and TARA stand by RAJ’s bed. A no-nonsense English doctor, Dr. Andrew CLARKE, enters, holding a clipboard.

Dr. CLARKE:

(serious, looking at them all)
"Your father had a **s**tress-induced cardiac episode. He’s lucky it wasn’t a full heart attack. His blood pressure is dangerously high, and this kind of stress is killing him."

SIMRAN:

(shocked, finally shaken)
"But… but we eat healthy! Only organic almonds and err... quinoa!"

Dr. CLARKE:

(*unimpressed)*
"It’s not quinoa, Mrs. MALHOTRA. It’s the constant pressure, the competition, the need to prove yourselves. His heart can’t handle this ridiculous lifestyle."

(Silence. The weight of it finally sinks in.)

TISHYA:

(quiet, bitter)
"Told you."

(TARA, slowly putting her phone away, realizing this isn’t ‘Okay’ any more.)

SIMRAN:

(breaking down)
"What were we doing? We almost lost him… for what? A fancier wedding than the Vermas?"

(She looks at TISHYA, guilt-ridden.)

SIMRAN:

(softly, sincere for the first time)
"Beti… I’m sorry."

SCENE 5: A SIMPLER WEDDING RECEPTION

The scene opens at the new, simpler wedding reception in the garden. The guests are multicultural and the bride (TISHYA) and the ENGLISH GROOM sit together on a garden bench. **S**oft music plays as guests quietly chat with drinks in their hands, enjoying the calm atmosphere. RAJ and SIMRAN sit on garden chairs, looking relaxed for the first time in the entire play.

RAJ:

(sipping a glass of water, looking content)
"You know, SIMRAN… this feels… nice."

SIMRAN:

(smiling warmly)
"It’s… peaceful, isn’t it? I didn’t realize how much we needed this."

RAJ:

(grinning)
"And look...no helicopters."

(They share a laugh. TISHYA and her ENGLISH GROOM sitting on a bench, smiling naturally. No forced grandeur, just genuine happiness.)

(TARA stands to the side, her phone off, soaking in the moment. TISHYA catches her eye.)

TISHYA:

(teasing)
"No Instagram story today?"

TARA:

(playfully rolling her eyes)
"Shut up. I’m living in the moment... It’s actually… kinda nice."

(They both smile, clearly closer than before.)

(VIKRAM Uncle walks over, wearing a ridiculously expensive suit, checking his gold watch. He tries to make conversation, but it’s clear no one is impressed any more.)

VIKRAM Uncle:

"Well, RAJ, this is… quaint. But, you know, my friend’s daughter is getting married next week. They’ve got a yacht booked for the reception."

RAJ:

(shrugs, smiling calmly)
"That’s nice, VIKRAM uncle. We’re happy with our garden."

(VIKRAM Uncle is clearly thrown off by the lack of reaction. The family obviously, no longer care about keeping up.)

(Just when things are calm and the family feels like they’ve finally broken free of the toxic cycle, MEENA Aunty enters in a new extravagant outfit, buzzing with fresh gossip.)

MEENA Aunty:

(whispering loudly to SIMRAN)
"SIMRAN, did you hear? The Kapoor family is throwing a big wedding next month. 8K worth of flowers! But their daughter’s wedding lenga is just from Mangas, you know off-the-peg… not even tailor made! Can you believe that?"

SIMRAN:

(laughing softly, but not engaging)
"MEENA Aunty, we’re just happy everything went well today. No need for all that any more."

(MEENA Aunty looks shocked.)

MEENA Aunty:
"Arre baba, no need? But how will people know you’ve done well?"

SIMRAN:

(smiling genuinely)
"They don’t need to, MEENA Aunty. We know."

(MEENA Aunty shakes her head, baffled, and moves on to her next target.)

(As the party ends and the guests start leaving, the family gathers together, looking proud of the simplicity they’ve embraced.)

RAJ:

(gently putting his hand on SIMRAN’s shoulder, looking at the ENGLISH GROOM, TISHYA and TARA)
"You know… I think we finally got it right."

TISHYA:
"About time."

TARA:

(mock serious)
"Can we have a normal family dinner now? Without hiring a celebrity chef?"

SIMRAN:

(laughing, nodding)
"Yes, beti, normal is good."

(They all laugh, the tension of the past weeks gone.)

(As the family walks towards the house, just before entering, MEENA Aunty is overheard talking to another guest.)

MEENA Aunty:

(whispering, overly dramatic)
"I knew the MALHOTRAs were going to do a small wedding. They're just… being humble now, you know? It's their strategy. Smart move."

(The family exchanges glances, laughing softly to themselves as they exit the garden.)

ACT 2

THE STATUS WAR

SCENE 1: THE ARMS RACE BEGINS

Sitting in MALHOTRAs lounge. A nice, comfortable home, but RAJ and SIMRAN are convinced it's "too small".

(SIMRAN scrolls through Instagram, gasping at yet another display of wealth.)

SIMRAN:

(gasping)
"RAJ! The Vermas bought a 10 bedroom house with a heated driveway! The snow melts automatically!"

RAJ:

(rubbing temples)
"SIMRAN, we live in London and it barely snows here."

SIMRAN:

"And look! WOW! The Kapoors got a Lamborghini! That's class, RAJ! Meanwhile, we're driving a… a…a….a….." *(shudders)*

RAJ:

(quickly interjecting.)

"We have a car! It even has Bluetooth!"

TARA:

(rolls her eyes)
"Dad! So does my hair straightener."

SCENE 2: THE FINANCIAL NIGHTMARE BEGINS

RAJ and SIMRAN meet with the BANK MANAGER, in his office, to discuss upgrading their house.

BANK MANAGER:

(Looking at the laptop screen, skeptical)
"Mr. MALHOTRA… you already have a mortgage, car loan, and wedding expenses still pending. A bigger house means more bills."

RAJ:

(wiping sweat, forcing a laugh)
"Yes, yes, but… we need something… grander."

SIMRAN:

(nodding aggressively)
"With an imported Italian marble floor! The kind that makes guests say ‘WOW’!"

BANK MANAGER:

(sighs)
"And how do you plan to pay for all this?"

(RAJ and SIMRAN exchange nervous glances.)

RAJ:

(weakly)
"Err...?"

RAJ:

(whispers to SIMRAN)

“We can get a personal loan.”

BANK MANAGER:

(Sighs)

“Mr MALHOTRA, it will accrue very high interest and I would advise you against it. My hands are tied and I am unable to offer you a loan.”

RAJ:

“Thank you for your advice. I think we will get a loan from somewhere else and upgrade the car.”

SCENE 3: THE LUXURY CAR DEBACLE

RAJ finally buys a used Mercedes car to impress everyone, but things don’t go as planned. VIKRAM Uncle arrives in a brand-new Rolls-Royce, parking it dramatically in front of RAJ’s house.

TARA:

(Looking out of window and seeing VIKRAM Uncle and his car, shouts.)

“Mum! Dad! WOW! Look at VIKRAM Uncle’s new Rolls-Royce!”

(RAJ and SIMRAN join TARA, and VIKRAM Uncle enters the lounge and joins them.)

VIKRAM Uncle:

(All smug)
"Oh, RAJ! Is this a bad time? I was just passing by in my new Rolls... Thought….

RAJ:

(clenching his jaw)

"Yes, yes, hello..."

RAJ:

(quietly says to SIMRAN and TARA)

“Yeah! Rolls with inherited money..!”

(gritting his teeth, forcing a smile)

"Ahh… nice." *(Gestures to his own new purchase on the drive.)* "Well, we also… got a Mercedes!"

(VIKRAM Uncle glances at RAJ’s car, looking amused.)

VIKRAM Uncle:

(smirking)
"Ah. Second-hand, right?"

(RAJ’s eye twitches. Meanwhile, TARA jumps in, recording for social media.)

TARA:

(excitedly filming)
"Okay, guys, today we’re doing a house tour of our LUXURY lifestyle! Swipe up for my dad’s nearly-new Mercedes!"

SIMRAN:

(fake laughing, whispering to RAJ)
"We need a newer one."

RAJ:

(whispering back, panicked)
"I just bought this one!"

SCENE 4: THE HEALTH CRISIS ESCALATES

In the lounge. SIMRAN finds RAJ sitting in the dark, breathing heavily. He is visibly shaken.

SIMRAN:

(concerned, sitting next to him)
"RAJ… what's wrong?"

RAJ:

(quiet, gripping his chest slightly)
"I don't… feel right. My heart keeps racing… my head feels heavy…Whilst driving, my sight became blurred and I was sweating. I narrowly missed hitting another car."

SIMRAN:

(worried, putting her hand on his shoulder)
"RAJ… this isn't worth it. I'll call Dr CLARKE."

SCENE 5: THE REALITY CHECK

Dr. Andrew CLARKE, SIMRAN and RAJ are in the lounge. RAJ is sitting whilst Dr Clarke and SIMRAN stand beside him.

Dr. CLARKE:

(serious, checking RAJ's pulse)
"Mr. MALHOTRA, your blood pressure is through the roof**.** You're dangerously close to another health episode."

SIMRAN:

(guilty, realizing the pattern)
"Last time, it was the wedding… now, the house and car…"

Dr. CLARKE:

(nodding)
"You’re repeating the same cycle. More money pressure, stress, sleepless nights, and for what? Just to look wealthier?"

(RAJ finally breaks down.)

RAJ:

(exhausted, voice shaking)
"I don’t even know why we’re doing this any more."

SIMRAN:

(softly, regretful)
"Neither do I."

(Dr. CLARKE sighs, giving one final warning.)

Dr. CLARKE:

(firm but kind)

“Please listen.”
"If you don’t stop this obsession now, RAJ, you might not get another warning. Your health won’t wait for you to impress your community**.**"

ACT 3

BREAKING FREE

SCENE 1: THE "NEW" LIFESTYLE

The MALHOTRAs lounge, now with fewer luxury items, as they attempt to simplify their lives.

(RAJ enters the lounge, dressed casually, stretching and breathing deeply.)

RAJ:

(relaxed, smiling)
"Ahhh… No more stress, no more loans, no more nonsense! Just peace."

SIMRAN:

(nervous, adjusting an old vase)
"RAJ, what if people start talking? You know this community. They'll say we lost everything!"

TARA:

(scrolling her phone, annoyed)
"Mum, we did lose everything… status, respect, Instagram aesthetic"

RAJ:

(cutting her off)
"We lost headaches and high blood pressure...and I'm fine with that!"

SCENE 2: THE HORROR OF SIMPLICITY

Sitting in MALHOTRAs lounge**.** The doorbell rings. Enter MEENA Aunty, overdressed as usual, with gold bangles clinking.

MEENA Aunty:

(gasps, looking around dramatically)
"RAJ beta… where is your big sofa? And that crystal chandelier? And..." *(lowers her voice, shocked)* "WHERE is your Mercedes?!"

SIMRAN:

(awkwardly)
"Oh, we… decided to downsize. Simplicity is our new mantra"

MEENA Aunty:

(clutching her pearls, devastated.)
"You mean… you’re poor now?!"

RAJ:

(calmly, sipping tea)
"No, MEENA Aunty. We’re free."

MEENA Aunty:

(fake sympathy, shaking her head)
"Hai hai, SIMRAN… what have you done to your family? No more designer sarees? No imported Italian marble floors? No brand-new car?! What will people say?"

SIMRAN:

(biting her lip, looking unsure now)
"I mean… maybe we should have got the marble floor…"

RAJ:

(firmly, interrupting)
"NO, SIMRAN. No more spending for others."

(MEENA Aunty dramatically sighs, shaking her head like it’s the end of the world.)

SCENE 3: THE FINAL TEST

Later, at a community gathering, RAJ and SIMRAN try to stay grounded...until MEENA Aunty starts her final attack.

MEENA Aunty:

(loudly, to the crowd, making sure everyone hears)
"Arre, did you all hear? RAJ and SIMRAN are living like common people now! No more luxury**!**"

VIKRAM Uncle:

(raising an eyebrow, intrigued)
"Really? No fancy cars? No marble floor? Interesting."

MEENA Aunty:

(mocking, patting SIMRAN’s hand)
"It’s good that you’re learning to live with less, SIMRAN. Not everyone can afford this lifestyle."

(SIMRAN’s eye twitches. RAJ notices her hesitation.)

RAJ:

(whispering to SIMRAN)
"Don’t let her get to you. We know what matters now. VIKRAM Uncle’s wealth is inherited."

SIMRAN:

(deep breath, standing tall)
"Yes. Health. Peace. Happiness. Not cars and marble floors."

(MEENA Aunty gasps, dramatically clutching her chest like SIMRAN just cursed at her.)

MEENA Aunty:

(whispering, horrified)
"SIMRAN… Are you feeling okay? Shall I call a doctor?"

RAJ:

(laughing, shaking his head)
"No need, MEENA Aunty. For the first time… we're perfectly fine."

(The crowd watches, impressed. Some even look thoughtful, like they're questioning their own lifestyles.)

(MEENA Aunty pouts in defeat. RAJ and SIMRAN exchange a knowing smile. They have finally escaped the toxic cycle.)

SCENE 4: TRUE SUCCESS

RAJ and SIMRAN, sitting in their lounge, laughing together, no stress, no worries. TARA is filming a new video, this time, about living a peaceful, meaningful life.

TARA:

(grinning at the camera)
"Alright guys, new content update! We used to flex cars and mansions, but now? We flex happiness and health. Stay tuned!"

(RAJ and SIMRAN smile...finally, at peace.)

ACT 4

THE PRICE OF PRIDE

SCENE 1: THE FINAL TEMPTATION

The MALHOTRAs lounge, now simple and peaceful. RAJ and SIMRAN sit together, sipping tea. TARA scrolls her phone absent mindedly. The doorbell rings.

SIMRAN:

(sighs)

“Let me guess… MEENA Aunty.”

(She opens the door. MEENA Anuty enters, holding an extravagant gold-embossed invitation.)

MEENA Aunty:

(glancing around the house, pretending to be impressed)
"Wow, Raj… this tiny house is so cozy, huh? No marble floors, no expensive furniture… Just like everyone else."

SIMRAN:

(nervous, trying to deflect)
"MEENA Aunty we’re fine. This is exactly what we wanted."

MEENA Aunty:

(grinning, pulling out an invitation)

“Ah, SIMRAN! Look at this!”

(waves an invitation)

“The Vermas are throwing a house warming party at their new mansion. A twenty-bedroom estate! With a waterfall in the foyer! You really should come. Everyone will be there… even Vikram bhai has upgraded his car again!"

(RAJ stiffens. SIMRAN hesitates. MEENA Aunty notices and leans in, lowering her voice.)

MEENA Aunty:

(mock concern)

“People notice, you are slipping away, beta.”

(RAJ’s grip on his teacup tightens. SIMRAN exhales, stealing a glance at RAJ. She knows this is his weakness.)

RAJ:

(*hesitating, staring at the invitation)*
"I don’t know, Simran… maybe we should just… go. One last time, just to show our face…"

(forcing a chuckle)

“It’s just one party, SIMRAN. No harm in going.”

SIMRAN:

(shakes her head, conflicted)

“Raj, we agreed. No more living for others. This is what we wanted."

TARA:

(joining them, rolling her eyes)
"Mum, Dad, come on. It's just one party. Why not go? It'll be fun."

SIMRAN:

(wary)
"But then it’ll be another house, another car, we’ll fall back into the same trap!"

MEENA Aunty:

(interjecting, slyly)
"It’s not about the trap, SIMRAN. It’s about respect. And do you think people will respect you, really, in this tiny little house? You’re slipping away from the community!"

(Raj looks at the invitation, visibly torn, while Simran watches his internal battle. Simran feels the pressure.)

SIMRAN:

“Acha, Okay it is after all our community.”

SCENE 2: THE FINAL BLOW

The Verma Mansion. Opulent. A spectacle of wealth. Crystal chandeliers. Servers in tuxedos. Guests dripping in diamonds. SIMRAN and RAJ enter, slightly overwhelmed.

RAJ:

(low voice)

“WOW! We used to dream about this.”

SIMRAN:

(studying him)

“Do we still?”

(Across the room, VIKRAM Uncle flashes a diamond-studded Rolex, bragging about his investments.)

VIKRAM Uncle:

(Looks at RAJ and tells his gang.)

“You should have seen his face when I pulled up in a Rolls outside his house! Classic!”

(VIKRAM’S crowd look at RAJ and giggle.)

(MEENA Aunty whispers to a group, glancing at RAJ and SIMRAN.)

MEENA Aunty:

(mock concern)

“It’s good they came… reminds everyone they’re still in our community.”

(fake sympathy)

“I just wish they had… you know, kept up.”

(RAJ overhears. His jaw clenches. He watches people flaunt their wealth, empty smiles masking their exhaustion.)

(Raj looks around...glittering wealth, empty conversations, and a man with everything sitting alone.)

RAJ:

(Whispers loudly to SIMRAN)

“Look at that utterly miserable... Mr. Patel Uncle! Sitting all alone! Yet the wealthiest here!”

(SIMRAN tip-toes to look at the man)

RAJ:

(Gripping SIMRAN’s arm tightly and looking around at the performers, acting like clowns.)

“This isn’t success…...look at the actors…..all emptiness.... Look at the clowns….”

RAJ:

(gasping)

“This… this... isn’t life… it’s a circus.”

RAJ:

(Gripping SIMRANS arm tighter)

“Look at them… performing, pretending… Just like us,… just like….” *(his voice falters, breath catching in his throat, realization finally breaking through)*

(Raj grips his chest. Vision swims. He staggers...then collapses)

(Gasps fill the room. A few guests instinctively reach for their phones to capture the moment instead of helping.)

SIMRAN:

(horrified!)

“RAJ?!”

TARA:

(furious!)

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?! CALL AN AMBULANCE!”

(TARA SLAPS a phone out of a guest’s hand. SIMRAN kneels beside RAJ, shaking him, eyes wild with fear.)

SIMRAN:

“RAJ! Stay with me! Someone DO something!”

(VIKRAM Uncle steps forward and then hesitates and looks at the others and steps back.)

(MEENA Aunty, VIKRAM Uncle… the entire elite crowd just watches. Unmoved. Detached. SIMRAN looks up at them, realisation crashing over her.)

(These people never cared.)

SCENE 3: THE POINT OF NO RETURN

RAJ lies unconscious. Dr. CLARKE, SIMRAN, TARA and TISHYA, all grim faced, stand by his bedside.

Dr. CLARKE:

(quietly)

“It wasn’t a competition, Mr. MALHOTRA... "

(A pause. SIMRAN grips side of the bed, staring at RAJ.)

SIMRAN:

(whispers)

“We tried, RAJ… we tried to stop… but it wasn’t enough, was it?”

(TARA and TISHYA stand nearby. TARA, for once, has no phone in her hand. No filters. No distractions. Just grief.)

(RAJ stirs slightly. His eyes flutter open. He looks at SIMRAN, his voice barely above a whisper.)

RAJ:

(weakly)

“Did we win?”

(SIMRAN grips the edge of the bed harder and freezes.)

SIMRAN:

(softly, holding back tears)

“No, RAJ…”

(A long silence. RAJ’s breathing slows. His eyes drift closed.)

(TISHYA lets out a soft, broken sob.)

(SIMRAN doesn’t cry. She just stares. Numb. Empty. Like the life has drained out of her too.)

SCENE 4: A QUIET RECKONING

Weeks later. The MALHOTRAs home. Quiet. Simple. No marble floors. No chandeliers. Just a home. SIMRAN, TISHYA, and TARA sit together in the lounge. A photo of RAJ sits on the table.

SIMRAN:

(looking at a photo of Raj)
"Now Raj has gone. I don’t know if I can ever forgive myself… he was so determined to keep up with everyone. I pushed him to change, but was it enough?"

TARA:

(quietly, sitting beside her mother)
"No, Mum. It wasn't about us. It was about him trying to live for others and feeling trapped."

SIMRAN:

(nodding, exhales, as if releasing decades of suffocating expectations.)
"He was never at peace. Even when we tried to simplify things, I could see he was still struggling inside."

TARA:

(picking up her phone, her finger hovering over an old video post)
"You know… I'm done with all that show-off stuff too. I don't need to prove anything to anyone any more."

Tishya:

(Pensive)

"No more struggles and he is now resting in peace."

(Door bell rings and MEENA Aunty enters, dressed in her usual extravagant fashion, looking around with forced sadness.)

MEENA Aunty:

(sighing theatrically and sits down.)

"Beti, so sorry… But at least, you know, he lived well. People still talk of his grand parties!"

(SIMRAN stares at her, something inside her finally snapping. She inhales, standing taller.)

SIMRAN:

(exhales)

"No, MEENA Aunty. He lived for others. And it cost him everything."

(MEENA Aunty blinks, caught off guard, before quickly composing herself and shifting the conversation to new gossip. The cycle continues, but SIMRAN is no longer part of it.)

MEENA Aunty:

(Changing the subject and says excitedly.)

“The Kapoors….”

(SIMRAN lowers her head and puts her hands to her ears and shakes her head to indicate enough.)

(MEENA Aunty touches her pearls and then shudders.)

(MEENA Aunty pouts, holds her head high and leaves the room abruptly, to show she feels insulted and offended.)

(No one reacts. A long calm pause.)

SIMRAN:

(exhales, steady, final)

“He spent his whole life chasing something. Finally… what did it mean?”

(A heavy pause. Then, TISHYA speaks. Steady. Determined.)

TISHYA:

“It meant nothing. That’s why I’m done.”

SIMRAN:

(frowns, confused)

“Done with what, beti?”

TISHYA:

(exhales)

“With expectations. With pretending. I don’t want to work long hours in the city...any more.

I want to be a teacher.”

(SIMRAN stares at her. The old version of her would argue. But now… she just listens.)

(A long pause. Then, she nods. A quiet understanding passes between them.)

SIMRAN:

(softly)

“Your father fought for status…. You’re fighting for yourself... He’d have envied that.”

(TARA, surprisingly thoughtful, puts down her phone.)

TARA:

(exhales)

“It’s time we all stop proving things to people who don’t care.”

(SIMRAN takes a deep breath and exhales. Then, SIMRAN smiles for the first time in weeks. A real smile. The weight of the world lifts.)

SCENE 5: REDEFINING SUCCESS

The MALHOTRAs lounge. All the decor is gone. In its place is peace. They are in the lounge feeling relaxed.

(TISHYA looks at the sky from the window, feeling free. Stretching her arms upwards and relaxing. TARA films a new video, but this time, there’s no fake luxury, no flexing.)

TARA:

(smiling, real)

“Alright guys. No more filters. No more fake wealth. We’re done with proving things. This?”

(gestures to her simple home, her family)

“This is the real flex.”

TARA:

(Turns to SIMRAN and TISHYA)

“I used to feel like losing followers meant losing my worth. Like if people weren’t watching, I didn’t exist. But honestly? I was just performing. Pretending. I wasn’t happy. Not really. Now? I don’t care about the numbers. I care about feeling... free!”

(SIMRAN picks up RAJ’s framed photo… then gently puts it down. She exhales deeply, as if releasing years of weight.)

(She turns to her daughters, smiling...not in grief, but in peace and nodding.)

SIMRAN:

(Softly smiles and nodding.)

“We know who we are….”

(Lights fade).

THE END.